

The Best Thing the Blind World has Ever Seen! Writing Camp for Visually Impaired Young People

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Abstract:

NLB has arranged writing camps biannually since the launch in 2005, totalling five camps to date. The camps last a week, and are partially financed by contributions from private foundations and bequests.

NLB's writing camps provide a practical opportunity for the visually impaired to participate in a writing course, and the camp contributes to inclusion, leaving nobody behind in the real enjoyment of sharing the joy and skills in writing literature.

Literature means a lot to this group, and many blind people write poems and other forms of literature for the desk drawer. Young people with visual impairments often struggle to overcome low self-esteem. The writing instruction organized at writing camps helps many participants to gain increased self-confidence and self-affirmation.

Keywords: Writing camp, creative writing, inclusion

Introduction

The title of this paper is a quote from a happy writing camp participant. Writing camps have been arranged by NLB, Norwegian library of talking books and braille, on five occasions.

NLB – Norwegian Library of Talking Books and Braille

NLB is a Public body under the auspices of the Norwegian Ministry of Culture, and part of the public library network. We are 56 employees and the annual budget is about 6,2 million euros.

NLB produces and lends audiobooks and braille books to visually impaired and print disabled readers throughout Norway. The range of books is available to anyone who struggles to read printed text, whether due to dyslexia, visual impairments or other disabilities that make reading difficult.

“The audiobook paragraph” (Sections 17 and 17a of the Norwegian Intellectual Property Rights Act) entitles NLB to produce accessible literature for its target groups. Members must demonstrate visual or reading disabilities.

NLB’s collection includes fiction and non-fiction for children and adults, periodicals and daily audio editions of four national newspapers. In addition, required reading for students at universities, colleges and vocational schools is also available. NLB’s collection includes about 18.000 audio books and 7.600 braille books. Annual production is more than 1.100 audio books and 400 braille books.

Fiction items are read by professional voice actors, while student literature and periodicals are largely produced using text-to-speech synthesis. All production and lending is digitally based.

NLB is a 24/7 online library, and has around 20.000 active users. NLB’s app (Lydhør) makes it possible to borrow and listen to audiobooks in DAISY-format on mobile phones and tablets (DAISY is an acronym and stands for Digital Accessible Information System). NLB also offers audiobooks for streaming or downloading, as well as on CD. Braille books are printed on demand, and delivered as a set of booklets.

NLB’s vision is “Equal access for all”, and NLB can be said to function as a state-run integration initiative. The ability to read is a prerequisite for equal opportunities and fundamental in order to participate in society.

NLB’s range of books for children and young people play an important educational role, as the books can be used for reading practice (listening to an audiobook while following the text for dyslexics, or training with tactile books and adapted braille for braille users).

The library also constitutes an important cultural function by ensuring that visually impaired and print disabled readers have access to the same literature as sighted readers. They get to know the same stories and this contributes to cultural cohesion.

Writing camps

History

NLB has arranged writing camps biannually since the launch in 2005, totalling five camps to date. The camps last a week, and are mainly financed by contributions from private foundations and bequests.

Why a writing camp?

NLB's writing camps provide a practical opportunity for the visually impaired to participate in a writing course. The camps create a real enjoyment of writing and literature. Literature means a lot to this group, and many blind people write poems and other forms of literature for the desk drawer.

It is difficult for visually impaired people to participate in an ordinary writing course without special preparation, such as staff with knowledge and understanding of their challenges, and information in braille or large print.

A writing camp for blind people also requires specially adapted computer technology.

Young people with visual impairments often struggle to overcome low self-esteem. The writing instruction organised at writing camps helps many participants to gain increased self-confidence and self-affirmation. One of the campers says:

“I learned an awful lot about myself and my writing voice, but I also experienced the many wonderful texts that can be produced within a fairly small room containing relatively few people.” (Ida 19 years old)

NLB's writing camps bring visually impaired people together over a common passion, rather than focusing on the common impairment. They can relax, not having to explain or elaborate on their disability or play “that nice blind girl” to quote one of the participants. The camp brings together blind and partially sighted young people from across Norway. Blind people with a common interest in literature and writing meet up, and the camp is also a unique meeting place for young braille users. One of the campers tells:

“Everyone at the writing camp is visually impaired and is interested in writing. Consequently, the participants share a strong passion, and, of course, none of the participants can see that well. That's not the most important criteria for participating in the camp, and nor is it the biggest challenge of being there. This particular arrangement is unique in Norway, and really great. We, as visually impaired participants, have one place where we don't have to be different. We can be unique instead.” (Kristin 22)

Participants

The target group for the writing camp is blind and partially sighted young people aged 16-25. A number of the participants have attended several times. Many are university students, but we have found that both younger adolescents, and those facing severe challenges due to other disabilities have also benefitted greatly from attending.

On average, the writing camps have around 14 participants. That way, everyone gets the opportunity for some one-to-one time with the instructing writers. It is also important that the group is not too large, as blind people need to orient themselves by sound and the voices of other participants.

The group has functioned extremely well socially, always assuring that everyone feels included.

Staff

There are high demands on the writers who teach at the camp. They need to be social, outgoing and empathetic, have good teaching skills, be easy to work with, have experience on writing courses and maintain a good literary level. We have found that two authors running the writing courses together is ideal, as it provides mutual inspiration and relief.

One member of staff from NLB is present at the camp at all times. In addition, around 8 hand-picked companions are employed. They live on site together with the participants for the duration.

Some participants need a little extra care and follow-up, but most just need help with practical things and “an arm to hold on to” in unfamiliar surroundings. Experience with visually impaired people is emphasised when employing companions, but social skills are just as important. We also emphasise an interest in literature in order to create a bond between participants and companions, and to try and avoid the “client role” as far as possible.

Experience from the writing camps shows that a number of companions and participants keep in touch after the camp.

A person with special knowledge of IT for the visually impaired, is responsible for planning the IT elements and practical assistance during the camp. Braille printers are available at the camp, and participants can take their own laptops, etc. (In Norway, all visually impaired young people are entitled to their own laptop.)

Coursework

The coursework focuses on literary writing in various genres (such as poetry and short story). Various elements of a writing process is explored, such as how to make a story, characters, building tension, dialogue, inner monologue, to be aware of clichés, how to use metaphors, comparisons, rhythm and so on.

A task might be: Write a text on the word water, and every time you don't know what to write, think of water, water, water. This particular task brought up a variety of funny texts.

On one occasion we made a trip to a botanic garden, and the participants were instructed to focus on the sweet smell of flowers and other greenery, writing a text on it afterwards.

The instructors have several times made use of the participants' reliance on using their sense of touch and hearing, and suggested they explore their own unique experiences in writing.

All the authors on the writing camps have been impressed with how willing young people are to read texts aloud and share with one another.

Additional program

Examples of other “specialist” programmes at the writing camps include meetings with other writers, translators, rap courses, storytelling courses, radio courses, film nights with audio-description and meetings with directors. There are also excursions, swimming and picnics.

The young people have been particularly active and engaged both on the writing course and on outings, and have served as excellent ambassadors for a group most people know very little about.

The camp concludes with all participants recording their own text in NLB's studios. On the last night of camp there is a party with speeches and songs, and many contributions from all the participants.

In recent years, a writing camp blog has been set up, featuring mood reports and texts. Participants, companions and authors are all invited to contribute, and the blog even continues to be updated after the camp ends.

Some participants have gone on to write articles featured in library journals, educational journals, periodicals for the blind, and local newspapers. One of the participants has also had a contribution published in a Norwegian publication for secondary schools.

Conclusion

Two participants summarize:

“I will remember this camp for as long as my brain continues to function! I want to return to such a community, to continue working on my writing, being brave enough to accept feedback and freeing myself up even more.” (Ingunn 18 years old)

“Writing is a wonderful medicine for so much, particularly joy and longing!” (Mirnesa 20 years old)

Writing camps for the visually impaired are an important reminder for everyone working with literature just how much literature can mean to us.

The first time the writing camp was organised, there was an absolutely magical atmosphere. We experienced some performance anxiety when we proceeded with the second camp, but to quote one of the participants: “Nobody would be lying to say that this camp was *at least* no worse than the last one. Maybe it was *even better..?*” We would definitely claim that each writing camp has taken on its own unique quality.